

INTEGRATING CRITICAL LITERACY STRATEGIES IN COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTION IN THE EARLY PRIMARY CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a framework for integrating critical literacy approaches into comprehension instruction in K–2 classrooms. Drawing on the foundational work of Paulo Freire and contemporary scholars like Vasquez, Janks, McLaughlin, and DeVogd, the article outlines five instructional steps: determining the author's message, problematizing through multiple perspectives, connecting messages to sociopolitical issues, seeking additional information, and taking social action. Critical literacy is positioned as a key component of culturally responsive pedagogy, specifically supporting the development of critical consciousness while maintaining academic excellence and cultural competence. The framework addresses practical constraints teachers face, including time limitations and potential controversies around teaching for social justice. By teaching students to evaluate texts through lenses of fairness and justice, this approach empowers young learners to recognize inequities and contribute meaningfully to creating more just communities, while simultaneously developing essential comprehension skills aligned with curriculum standards.

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Introduction

Critical literacy is an approach to teaching and learning that develops children's ability to understand the world in terms of fairness and justice (Bennett, 2012). A core premise of critical literacy is that texts are socially constructed from different perspectives and therefore cannot be neutral (Vasquez et al., 2019). Therefore, during comprehension instruction, a critical literacy approach invites children to evaluate the key messages an author presents in the text. The goal is to imagine and utilize multiple perspectives, identify social issues connected to those key messages, make connections to broader issues of justice, and explore ways that responsible decision-makers can take action toward greater justice (Janks & Vasquez, 2001).

Comprehension instruction often focuses on teaching students strategies such as predicting, summarizing, identifying main ideas, questioning, making inferences, and visualizing (Dewitz & Graves, 2024). However, it may not include a critical approach to evaluating the messages that are present in the text. When a critical literacy approach is absent from the curriculum, teachers can make small, but meaningful adjustments to begin to include critical literacy practices.

In a critical literacy approach to comprehension instruction, teachers focus on the messages within texts and evaluate them in terms of fairness and social justice. To do this, students must be aware that texts contain messages, develop the skills and strategies to identify them, and apply critical thinking to evaluate those messages. Kohl (1995, p. 15) argues that developing a critical sensibility does not come naturally to children and that they require adult guidance to evaluate the messages they encounter. Reading aloud and discussing texts is one way to support students in developing the ability to critically evaluate what they read and the messages embedded within texts. The goal is to develop students' skills, knowledge, and habits of thinking to support their growth as critical thinkers and active citizens.

There is no single way to approach the discussion of messages in texts with children or engage in critical thinking and evaluation. From my experience working with veteran and pre-service teachers, it can be challenging to develop a critical literacy

approach at first. Therefore, it can be helpful to begin with a more explicit, step-by-step process, which is described in this article.

Educators are often familiar with culturally responsive teaching. A critical literacy approach can be seen as a component of culturally responsive pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995), a leading scholar in the field, defines culturally responsive pedagogy as having three interrelated goals: (1) develop academic excellence, (2) foster cultural competence, and (3) cultivate critical consciousness. All three must be present for teaching and learning to be considered culturally responsive. When used effectively, critical literacy can help students develop a critical consciousness—which is an awareness of social issues and the ability to address them in ways that lead to greater fairness and justice (Freire, 1970).

Background on Critical Literacy

Paulo Freire, in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), proposed a literacy model that provided adults with both the skills to read and the strategies to evaluate their life situation through the lens of oppression and justice. His goals for learning were transformational: he sought to strengthen adults' literacy skills while engaging them in dialogue to build a critical consciousness about their circumstances. This change was envisioned to liberate both the oppressed and the oppressor by restoring a shared sense of humanity grounded in justice. Freire's ideas and philosophy have since inspired educators to consider how such principles might be applied in diverse learning environments.

In the United States, Vivian Vasquez, Hilary Janks, Barbara Comber, Maureen McLaughlin, and Glenn DeVoogd have drawn on Freire's work to adapt his ideas for teachers working with primary and elementary-aged students. Through her research and classroom practice, Vasquez demonstrates that young children are capable of engaging in critical dialogue and taking meaningful action to address social justice issues (Vasquez et al., 2003). McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) describe multiple ways teachers can integrate comprehension instruction with critical inquiry, encouraging

students to question the author's message and develop a deeper awareness of social issues.

Across this body of scholarship, there is consensus that while there is no single method for implementing critical literacy, the shared goal involves challenging systems of power (Luke, 2012). A central purpose of education, therefore, is to prepare students to recognize and address sociopolitical issues and to develop the skills, strategies, and habits of mind necessary for creating more equitable and just systems (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vasquez et al., 2019).

The next section presents steps for applying a critical approach specifically to comprehension instruction in elementary classrooms. This framework offers an entry point for teachers seeking to begin integrating critical literacy into their instruction when they have been asked to use a particular curriculum. It is intended as a starting place, not as the only or a comprehensive way to enact critical literacy practices.

Integrating Critical Literacy into Comprehension Instruction

In order to integrate critical literacy approaches in comprehension instruction, teachers should approach comprehension instruction with the goal of developing students' ability to decode and comprehend text while fostering the critical thinking skills to evaluate texts and their messages through the lens of fairness and justice (Luke & Freebody, 1990, 1999). Even when the learning objective in a teacher's guide may be focused on a specific comprehension skill, such as inferencing or summarizing; within a critical literacy framework, the teacher can still focus on teaching the identified comprehension skill, while also developing students' ability to analyze the messages embedded in the text.

The process described below focuses on the K–2 classroom, where teachers often use picture books to teach comprehension strategies. While these steps are framed for primary grades, the same process can be adapted across elementary grade levels. These steps are inspired by DeVoogd and McLaughlin, Vasquez, and Janks, each of whom presents strategies for deconstructing texts with children in ways that promote a social justice approach to reading instruction.

Step 1: Determine Main Idea or the Author's Message

After reading a story, or any type of text, students identify the main idea or key message the author conveys. This can be guided through questions such as:

- What did the author want the main character to learn?
- What message does the author want readers to take away?
- What does the author want us to believe?

This step grounds students' comprehension in the author's intent and prepares students to examine that message critically. For example, in the picture book *The Doorbell Rang* by Pat Hutchins, students may identify the main idea as "it's important to share."

Step 2: Problematize and Seek Multiple Perspectives

Next, students evaluate the identified message or main idea through multiple perspectives, connecting those perspectives to questions of fairness. In critical literacy terms, this process is called problematizing (Freire, 1975). Teachers might ask:

- What do you think about this message?
- Do you agree with it?
- Does everyone experience this message in the same way?

For example, using the main idea from *The Doorbell Rang*, students can reflect on the idea of sharing and identify times when sharing may not be fair or appropriate. They might identify times when sharing can be dangerous for others, such as sharing snacks with peanuts or medications. The goal is not to criticize the message, but to explore the complexity of the message and to consider how fairness can depend on the context (Vasquez, 2013).

Step 3: Connecting Messages to Sociopolitical Issues

After thinking critically about the message, students make connections to real-world issues related to that idea within their classroom, school or community. These

connections can occur during comprehension instruction, or depending on scheduling constraints and curricular structures, during other parts of the day, such as a morning meeting. When time and flexibility allow, it can be especially meaningful for students to explore how the message relates to larger community issues beyond the school. This supports civic engagement and situates learning in authentic contexts.

With primary-age students, it can be helpful to examine issues in their local and immediate environment (Levstik & Barton, 2023, pp. 38–40). For example, a classroom issue related to the theme of sharing from *The Doorbell Rang* may focus on school rules around sharing snacks and winter clothing. Students may question such rules when classmates do not have the financial means to bring snacks or warm clothing to school. Sharing can also connect to many issues in the larger community. Food insecurity, habitat loss, and access to inclusive playgrounds are some of the issues that primary-age children can identify as issues related to how we share resources and spaces as a community.

Step 4: Seek More Information

As students explore community issues, they may identify areas where they need more information. Responsible decision-makers, who strive for ethical actions, need to be informed about the issues under consideration (Ehrenworth et al., 2021, p. 37).

Continuing with the example of sharing, students might consider how fairness relates to access to resources in their community. At this stage, learning expands beyond reading comprehension and often becomes interdisciplinary. Students might read nonfiction texts, contact local experts, or invite community members—such as scientists, environmentalists, or government officials—to share information about what is currently being done about the issue and what actions students might take to contribute to solutions. Technology tools such as video conferencing (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet) can connect classrooms to local and national experts and further enrich learning.

For example, related to an issue like food insecurity, students may not have the information they need to understand the root causes of the issue and how people in the community are working to address this problem. Students may not be aware of how

some people and organizations are working to support people with their immediate needs regarding food access. In this circumstance, inviting different community leaders and experts to the classroom can facilitate deeper learning about the issue and how it is being addressed in their community.

Step 5: Taking Action

After learning about an issue, students can engage in social action. Students might educate others about the issue, advocate for new rules or policies, or organize a school or neighborhood event where they take direct action. Students can also study historical and contemporary figures—such as environmentalists or social activists—and learn what actions have been effective in creating solutions and change. These experiences empower students to see themselves as capable of contributing to fairness and justice in their communities (Bennett, 2012).

For example, related to sharing, students may develop a plan to make sure everyone has a daily snack and/or the winter gear they need to stay safe and warm. Students may plant milkweed and encourage community members to do the same to support the declining monarch butterfly population as a way to share space and restore lost habitats. The actions depend on what issues students would like to address and determine meaningful possibilities.

Connecting Critical Literacy to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

While this article centers on developing students' critical consciousness and justice-oriented thinking, these goals align closely with the other two components of culturally relevant pedagogy—ensuring academic excellence and cultivating cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In this approach, teachers remain committed to the learning objectives outlined in the curriculum standards, ensuring that all students achieve academic excellence. During comprehension instruction, that would be the learning target that is being addressed. Teachers foster cultural competence by connecting instruction to students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds. Addressing issues that matter to students is one way to engage students in meaningful and relevant instruction. Through critical literacy practices, students develop and

strengthen a critical consciousness—an awareness of social inequities and the skills to take thoughtful action toward justice (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Addressing Teacher Constraints

Some teachers may feel they lack the time, resources, or administrative support to explore community issues in depth (Lewison et al., 2002). This tension is understandable, particularly when teachers are required to adhere closely to standardized curricula. In such cases, it can be helpful to begin small, focusing on classroom-based issues such as sharing snacks or ensuring fairness in group work, before moving toward broader community topics like food insecurity or access to healthy food.

Other teachers may not feel they have the expertise about social issues to address those issues with students in their classroom. Therefore, it is important for educators to examine their own capacity to identify issues of justice, investigate their root causes, and imagine solutions to foster equity and justice (Lewison et al., 2002). As educators, we must cultivate our own critical awareness to facilitate a critical literacy approach with students.

In today's educational climate, teaching for social justice can be viewed as controversial, and educators may worry that parents, administrators, or colleagues may question their efforts to foster a critical consciousness (Cho, 2015). It is important to respond to criticisms thoughtfully and intelligently. It can be helpful to remind critics that that people practicing a critical literacy approach do not tell students what to think (Vasquez, 2010); rather, the goal is to teach students how to think more critically—how to evaluate personal and collective choices through the lens of fairness and justice in order to create meaningful solutions to real-world issues (Weil, 2016, p. 17). It is helpful to identify the standards that support this type of learning in order to demonstrate the focus on developing skills and strategies with your students. It may be helpful, at times, to identify the common values of treating others fairly, being responsible for one's words and actions, and working collaboratively with others towards shared goals that are inherent in this type of instruction.

Considerations

The ultimate goal of critical literacy is to challenge unjust power structures within society and to promote greater equity and justice (Cho, 2015; Freebody, 2008; Luke, 2012). This work involves evaluating the messages embedded in various types of text, thinking critically about those messages, and ultimately taking informed action to address issues of fairness in effective and responsible ways. There is no single "right" way to accomplish this goal (Luke, 2012); rather, critical literacy can take many forms depending on context, purpose, and community needs.

Justice is a foundational value embedded in U.S. civic tradition. When teachers take an integrated approach to teaching and learning, combining social studies content with literacy learning, teachers have the opportunity to simultaneously develop civic understanding and literacy skills (Levstik & Barton, 2021). Critical literacy is one powerful pathway for achieving these goals.

Conclusion

Most educators would agree that education serves multiple purposes. One of these is to develop critical thinkers who can identify issues of injustice and work effectively toward greater fairness and equity. Educators can support this goal by engaging students in critical dialogue about the messages they encounter texts. This work can begin in the earliest grade levels. Adults can teach students to identify messages in texts, evaluate them critically, and take action for justice when appropriate. A critical literacy approach provides teachers with the strategies needed to cultivate these important skills and habits of mind in students.

However, both new and experienced teachers may find it challenging to develop a pedagogy that engages young children in critical dialogue around social justice issues. For some, it can be helpful to begin with a structured process, while recognizing that there are many ways to foster critical consciousness in students. Following a process allows educators to take initial steps with greater confidence. It is similar to cooking

with a recipe: the first time you prepare a new dish, you may follow the recipe closely. Over time, as you gain experience and confidence, you begin to improvise, adapt, and expand your repertoire. In the same way, educators develop skills, knowledge, and insight needed to apply critical literacy practices in flexible and creative ways.

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